

Advent 1  
27/11/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Psalm 122

Matthew 24:36-44

On making time

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*In a sentence:*

*Time is what passes between persons; love is time.*

On the first Sunday of Advent each year, our readings touch on time and the coming judgement of God. Yet these themes are set in an apocalyptic key far from modern thinking about the nature of time. While these old texts answer a question about the kind of time we live in, we would need to share the apocalyptic sense of the times for the answer to make sense to us.

Not to put too fine a point on it, this is impossible. We can't unthink what modern culture has taught us about the nature of time, and become first-century apocalypticists. What we can do, is get a clearer sense of how time and life are connected for us today, and ask what someone like St Paul might say into that.

For us today, time is a "forever" thing: it rolls on and on. We might calculate that one day the universe will end with the heat-death of all things (everything ending up at the same cool temperature) but this is not a limit on our *experience* of time. Time is close enough to infinite that we can think it to be stable and ourselves to be *placed in* it to *fill it up*. This time is like a jar into which we pour what we do. The "bucket list" method of living our lives is perhaps the quintessential symbol of this for our time. The bucket list names those "experiences" with which we hope to fill our few moments in infinite time. The great time-bucket, of course, is indifferent as to whether there's anything in it or not. It remains a bucket if we never get around to doing anything. But even a life rich in experiences is but a drop in the enormity of the infinite time-bucket. And so, when our actions in time's ever-flowing stream are merely "in" time, they finally amount to nothing. It matters not what we do; time rolls on and sweeps everything away. Infinite time is finally empty time. (Consider a thought from a few weeks ago, that eternal life might be *boring*). The old Greeks had it right when they imagined that the god Chronos consumes all his children.

If we hear St Paul this morning through this notion of time and our place in it, he can make little sense. For him, time is not infinite but has an end, and soon. But the "end"-thing is *distracting*. If we don't expect time ever to end, why not simply dismiss what Paul says about life in time? If you're never going to *get* to the end which is the judgement, why bother *how* to get there? How could our unending time finally come to something, come to some meaning, to some sensible summing-up? And so Paul's exhortation that we live a certain kind of life makes little sense to many today not because his morals are out of step with ours but because his idea of time looks wrong. What we do cannot matter for the reasons Paul seems to propose.

And yet, for all this, it is not an end to time which concerns Paul; he anticipates less that time will end than that a *judgement* will be made. This judgement reveals the *nature* of time: what time is for. Paul's call to the sleepers to awaken looks at first to be about keeping ourselves safe in the coming judgement. Yet his concern is not the threat of judgement but the nature of our time *here and now*. What is the purpose of our being,

and how does what we do embody that purpose (or not). “Live this way”, Paul says, not because the final judgement is coming but because this is what time properly requires.

This, then, is the difference between our sense of time and Paul’s sense: our unbounded time finally swallows us up and sweeps us away, while Paul’s time is *waiting* for us. The time in which we live is for him not empty and indifferent about whether or not we pour anything into it. God’s time waits for us. God’s time *expects* something, *looks* for something, *demand*s something. And it is not yet God’s time until this demand is met.

And this brings us to the surprise in the gospel’s proposal about time. To wake from sleep (as Paul commands), to lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, to live into the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control Galatians 5.22f) – all this is to *make* time. This “making” of time is not what we usually mean – *finding* time for some good work, making time “for” something. It is the making of time into God’s own time: the creation of a true timeliness in our lives. What Paul criticises – drunkenness, debauchery, jealousy, the “fruits of the flesh” – these are empty time, time within which meaning is eroded as mutually responsible relationships are broken down. Election season in a democracy like ours is empty time in this way. Time is what passes between persons, and properly to “make time” is live toward an interpersonal human being made from love and gentleness and patience.

Do *this*, Paul says, and time – the substance of your lives – comes into being.

But also, “Do this”, Jesus says, for the remembrance of me – also a creating of a certain kind of timeliness. Do this, take and taste *bad* time – broken body and spilt blood – and hear the promise: This is my body given for you, that you might have bodies, my blood that you might have blood. Or, *this is my time*, given for you, that you might have time. If we’re paying attention, we might marvel that God can make time for us from the nothingness of broken time: from our choices for sin and death.

This is no mere wish or other-worldly thing. The word the sacrament acts is that, gathering as we do around the one table, all the time we need is standing next to us, the (only) time which matters.

Making time is now not about “finding” time but creating it through lives of love and care. The time of our lives has a face which turns towards ours and asks, Do you love me?

Sleepers, awake. Paul says. Open your eyes and see. Live love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And you will have time enough.

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